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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 004104

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SUBJECT: AYATOLLAH HUSSEIN AL-SADR COMMENTS ON IRAQ'S PROBLEMS, WAY AHEAD

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ayatollah Hussein Al-Sadr shared his views on the need for the emergence of new, moderate political figures to pull Iraq out of its current political crises and on regional relations at an Iftar with Ambassador Khalilzad on October 22. He discussed three possible options to reorganize the government and reinvigorate national reconciliation, which ranged from changing either the PM or his cabinet to bringing in the National Salvation Government. Hussein is a moderate Shia cleric who has some influence within his community. END SUMMARY.

Moderate Political Leaders Needed

¶2. (C) Al-Sadr opined to the Ambassador that the political factions that now dominate Iraq's political life have failed, and cannot bring the country out of its current crises. Al-Sadr asserted that what is needed are moderate religious-nationalistic and moderate liberal political figures. New leaders are bound to emerge, because the public is disenchanted with the current leadership. Al-Sadr said that Sunni leaders in the government do not represent the Sunni community. He reasoned that if they did, their inclusion in the government would have brought increased security. Al-Sadr said that new Sunni leaders must come forward who have their community's support.

¶3. Al-Sadr stated that there are untapped professionals, tribal leaders, and educated people in Baghdad and the governorates who can fill leadership positions. Al-Sadr said Brigadier Mozam, who is from one of the southern tribes, has a good reputation. Al-Sadr said he has known Mozam for many years. Other untapped leaders include Wathab Shaker Al-Dulaimi, a member of Parliament and a moderate Sunni, Safar al-Goud, and Mithal al-Alusi; Al-Sadr also mentioned tribal leaders Nasser Aribi Al-Haram and Al-Aza. He opined that tribal roots are resilient, and moderates or liberals with such roots could bring balance and gradually gain control of the situation.

¶4. (C) Ambassador commented that some say the current moderate leaders have not succeeded in attracting more votes in the election because the marjaia suggested the UIA. If the marjaia continue to endorse the seven parties in the coalition, no cross-sectarian party would have a chance. Ayatollah Al-Sadr responded that the current, liberal, leaders lack vision and roots. If they expand their horizons, they would get more votes; perhaps not enough to win, but at least enough to have a stabilizing role. Al-Sadr said that Ayatollah Sistani and he have talked about these problems and their disappointment with the current government leaders.

Three Options for Moving Forward

15. (C) Al-Sadr said that the current government is not a government of national unity, because it continues to operate in sectarian ways. Instead of listening to the Prime Minister, the Ministers follow the politicians who appoint them. Al-Sadr said that PM Maliki is a good person, but he does not make tough decisions and is constrained by the seven political parties in the Shia coalition. Ayatollah Al-Sadr saw three possibilities that would break the impasse:

- Maliki remains as PM, but changes his Ministers with independent technocrats;
- Maliki resigns, and former Prime Ministers Jaffari and Allawi take over; and
- The National Salvation Government is ushered in, without Maliki.

16. (C) Al-Sadr thought that Jaffari should only return as PM if he is with Allawi, as one complements the other, and to preserve the coalition. Jaffari would need to accept Allawi as a partner, but the key is to bring in competent professionals to the cabinet. Al-Sadr stopped short of describing how the National Salvation Government could come to power and recognized that this option would have little support.

17. (C) The Ambassador replied that the marjaia could press Maliki to affect change in his government and make the decisions needed to move Iraq in the right direction. The marjaia does not need to make a public statement, but people should understand that Maliki is not acting against the will

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of the people or the marjaia. Al-Sadr agreed, adding that Sistani and he want to strengthen Maliki, to allow Maliki to select advisors and ministers for their competence and not for their party affiliation. The government should be pared down to no more than seven or eight ministries, which would allow the government to focus on them and increase their strength and capacity. Other ministries could be added later as needed. The parties may react negatively to these changes, but Al-Sadr thought this change could do no more harm than what is currently being done. He did not think that the Kurds would object to the changes.

18. (C) Commenting on the political blocs in Parliament, Al-Sadr stated that the Shia are allies of the US, even if some extremists oppose the US because of what their political masters tell them. For Al-Sadr, complaints of US favoritism towards the Sunni are rooted in the way the Sunnis became part of the national unity government. The US pressed for Sunni inclusion, and this was resented by some, particularly when the Sunnis were not able to deliver stability or security. Al-Sadr stated that he does not believe that Sunni representatives support terrorism, but that some are linked with groups that make Iraq insecure.

Security

19. (C) Ayatollah Al-Sadr lamented that violence in Iraq has not subdued during Ramadan. This is proof, he said, that terrorists do not practice any religion. He denounced political interference on security matters. The two should be kept separate. The government, for political reasons, is not confronting the militias, Al-Sadr said. Now everybody has death squads, no matter if they are Badr or Jaysh al-Mahdi. Moqtada Al-Sadr should have been legally confronted before his power grew. The same is happening now with Mahmoud Al-Hassani Al-Sarki (NOTE: a radical cleric in Karbala. END NOTE), but nothing has been done, the Ayatollah stated. Al-Sadr also said he was surprised that

Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi said the US would negotiate with the so-called resistance.

¶10. (C) The case of Tawafuq member of Parliament Adnan Dulaimi is another case in point of political interference on security matters. He has weapons in his house and car, Al-Sadr stated (erroneously), and yet he is not held accountable for his actions (NOTE: Ambassador noted that Dulaimi is not responsible for his security agent's association with terrorists, but that his rivals are exploiting the media's mischaracterizations for political gain. END NOTE). Al-Sadr also criticized Adnan Dulaimi for his attempts to keep open a controversial office of Tawafuq in the Baghdad district of Al-Huriya, despite the decision of all community leaders to close it, at least temporarily, as part of a plan to preserve peace in the area. (NOTE: The office is now closed. END NOTE.)

Regional Relations

¶11. (C) Iraq should have friendly relations with its neighbors, but no country should claim a stake in Iraq's internal affairs, Al-Sadr said. As long as there are foreign interferences in Iraq, there would be no stability in the country. Al-Sadr stated that Iran, Syria and the UAE are the most dangerous countries for Iraq, while Saudi Arabia is the least harmful. Syria supports terrorists entering Iraq, and allows Baathists and agents of the former regime to organize and collaborate. Former Baathists are gathering strength, Al-Sadr stated, and Arab countries are giving them whatever they need. A firm position towards Syria is needed.

¶12. (C) Al-Sadr said Iran and Syria are friends, yet they support opposing groups in Iraq. He characterized this as based on their shared enmity towards the US and their desire to see the US fail in Iraq. If the US is occupied in Iraq, Al-Sadr said, attention is shifted away from them. Iran has many offices and a strong presence in Iraq. Al-Sadr criticized Iraqi politicians, such as SCIRI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, who has called on the US to speak with Iran on Iraq issues. Al-Sadr thought this was comparable to giving Iran oversight over Iraq issues. Iran does not hesitate to exert its influence and to inflict sabotage and harm on Iraq, through its support of the Badr and Jaysh al-Mahdi militias. Al-Sadr also criticized Dubai as a source of financing for the so-called resistance.

¶13. (C) Al-Sadr decried the pernicious influence of money

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for Sunni and Shia extremists. Many Iraqis are not committed to Iran, Syria, or the UAE, but are attached to their money. He proposed countering this influence by creating work opportunities to lure members away from the Badr and the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia, which he thought was already disintegrating.

Federalism and National Institutions

¶14. (C) Al-Sadr said he supported federalism, but only if there is a strong central government that retains control over oil resources, defense, interior, and foreign affairs, and other selective key functions. Services should be governed by the regions. He also stated that all governorates should be included in the establishment of a federal system, and expressed concern that the Kurds were expanding their reach into Kirkuk, Mosul and Diyala.

¶15. (C) Al-Sadr expressed particular concern on the politicization of the Council of Representatives Committee on de-Baathification and the Committee on Public Integrity. Ambassador commented that putting the accused in jail while

they await trial is unfair, and that he personally knows of cases where mere accusations has led honest people to flee the country. Al-Sadr noted that in Islam, an accused is innocent until proven guilty, a principle that he thought these committees were not applying. Instead, CoR members are using the committees to intimidate people out of their jobs. The result is that the government is further paralyzed, as decision makers are afraid that their actions will get them in trouble. With respect to the national reconciliation process, Al-Sadr wondered how it could progress when the person heading it, Minister of State for National Reconciliation Akram al-Hakim, is not himself committed to reconciliation.

¶16. (C) Al-Sadr stated that Iraq needs institutions to bring people together, similar to his Center for Religion, a project to foster dialogue among religious sects. The establishment of this Center should not wait until the security situation improves, because such institutions such as the Center have a role to play in bringing about peace and security. There are many moderate Iraqis, he added, who reject sectarianism and believe in Iraq.

KHALILZAD